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ABSTRACT

In 1989, Saddleback College's (SC's) English composition assessment process was evaluated to determine its success in placing students in appropriate courses. To gain entrance to one of SC's three composition courses, students must complete a prerequisite course or take the College English Placement Test (CEPT) and, at the option of the student, provide a writing sample. The three courses available are a university-level composition course, a composition class that satisfies the composition requirement for graduation with an associate degree, and a remedial/basic skills course. Random samples were chosen from the 2,714 students who had taken the CEPT between July 5, 1988 and January 31, 1989, from the students who provided a writing sample, and from the students who were not placed with the CEPT. Study findings, based on a comparison of placement results and course success, include the following: (1) students who enrolled in a course more advanced than that suggested by their CEPT score succeeded at a higher rate than the group that took the recommended course; this may be due to the fact that a student would normally have needed to take the writing sample to qualify for placement into the more advanced class; (2) of the 244 students who took the writing sample, 94% were successful in English composition; the success rate for all students in the composition courses was 69%; (3) the success rates for CEPT-based placement students and students who took the prerequisite courses were about the same; (4) the success of the students placed through the assessment process indicated that the cutoff scores for the CEPT were not too low, and that they may have been too high; and (5) the English composition faculty did not recommend a change in the minimum testing levels due to their experience with the results of student placement based on the CEPT scores. An appendix provides CEPT scores and data on course success. (JMC)

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THE MATRUCULATION PROGRAM.

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A Review of the English Composition Assessment of
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the Matriculation Program

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Summary of Observations and Recommendations

1. Students who complete the writing sample are a very motivated group. They successfully complete the course in which they enroll ninety-four percent of the time. This compares with an average completion rate for all English composition students of sixty-nine percent.
2. The assessment process provides students with course placements that match the placements of continuing students resulting from completion of prerequisite courses. The likelihood of success of a student who entered a particular composition course, after she or he received that placement level from the assessment process, is the same as that for a student who enrolled after having completed the prerequisite course.
3. Composition course placement based on the writing sample is independent of the placement that results from the objective test. In other words, a student originally placed in the remedial level composition course because of his or her performance on the objective test, had the same chance of being placed in the transfer level course after completing the writing sample as a student originally placed in the associate degree level course. Because of this independence, any student who is not satisfied with his or her course placement following the objective test, no matter the level of that placement, should be encouraged to complete the writing sample.
4. It is clear that the objective test cut off scores are not too low. Students who enroll in the recommended courses have a high success rate. While it is not possible to use the results of this study to determine that the objective test cut off scores are not too high, there is reason to suppose that they are not. The determination of these scores followed a period of careful consideration by the English composition faculty. This was the same process used by the mathematics faculty to set the cut off scores for the assessment tests in that discipline and those scores were shown to be appropriate in a similar study to the one reported here. Because on their experience with the results of student placement based on these scores, the English

composition faculty feel the current minimum levels are appropriate. Further, the students do not appear to be dissatisfied. For those students who feel that their composition skills have not been accurately assessed, a well defined appeal process is in place. Consequently, no recommendations for change in the cut off scores of the objective portion of the English composition assessment process resulted from this investigation.

A Review of the English Composition Assessment of
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Introduction

The English composition curriculum at Saddleback College is divided into three levels. The transfer level course (English 1A -- Principles of Composition I) is generally accepted as equivalent to the first college level composition course by the universities in California. One level below the transfer course is a composition class (English 200 -- Fundamentals of Composition) that satisfies the composition requirement for graduation with an Associate in Arts (A.A.) degree. Two levels below the transfer course is the remedial/basic skills course (English 300 -- Beginning Writing).

To gain entrance to a particular English composition course at Saddleback College students must generally either complete the prerequisite course or receive the desired placement through the English composition assessment process. This process consists of an objective test, the College English Placement Test (hereafter referred to as the CEPT), and, at the option of the student, a writing sample. If the student is satisfied with the placement indicated by the CEPT score, the student is given permission to enroll in that course. The minimum scores are seventy for the

transfer course and fifty-five for the A.A. level class. If the student is dissatisfied with the initial placement, then she/he may complete a writing sample. If the placement resulting from this exercise is higher, then she/he is given permission to enroll in the more advanced course. If the placement is lower, she/he may still exercise the placement recommendation from the CEPT. If still not satisfied with the placement level, the student may enter into an appeal process that will result in a review of their situation and an individualized composition course placement.

Assessment Using the College English
Placement Test (CEPT)

A frequency distribution for scores achieved by the 2714 individuals who completed the CEPT between July 5, 1988 and January 31, 1989 was determined and placed in figure 1. This frequency distribution is, as expected, approximately Normal (i.e. bell shaped). The uncharacteristically large frequency spike corresponding to a CEPT score of seventy was due to the fact that this was the minimum acceptable score for placement into the transfer level course. Students who scored below seventy, but had reading scores that suggested to the English assessment coordinator that the student was likely to be successful in this level of composition, were reassigned a score of seventy for the CEPT. A similar explanation existed for the peak at fifty-five, since this was the minimum score for admission to the A.A. level composition course.

Of the 2714 individuals who took the CEPT during the period of study, forty-six percent were placed at the remedial level.

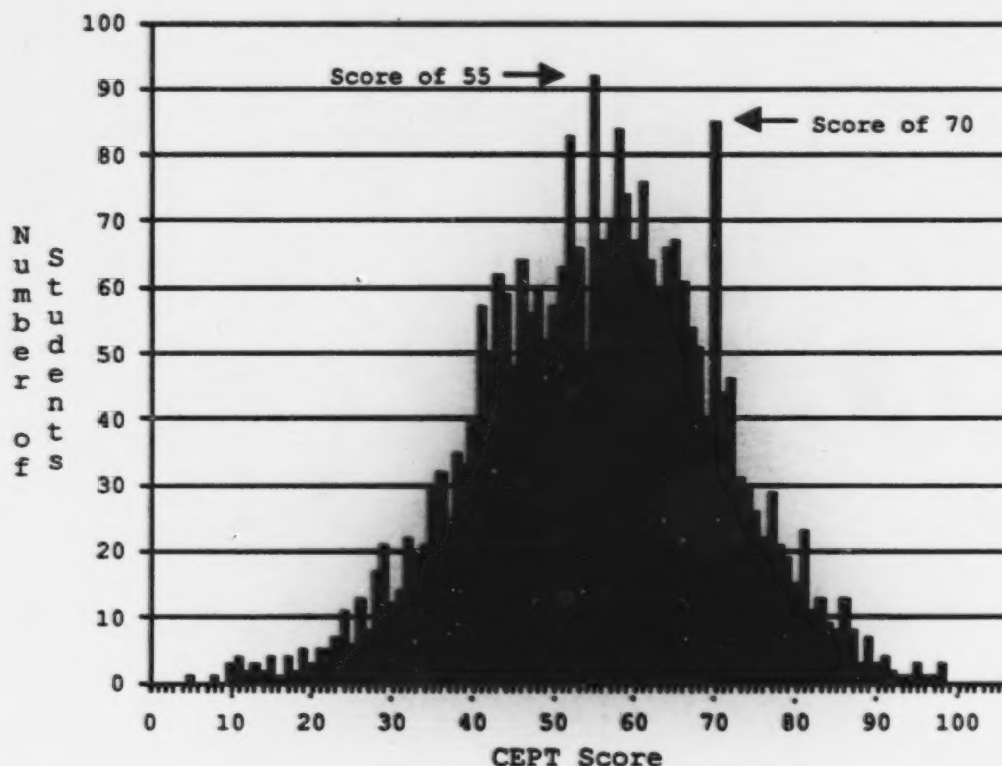


Figure 1
Frequency Distribution
of CEPT Scores
(N=2714)

The cut off for the transfer level course was at the eighty-second percentile and thus thirty-six percent of the individuals were placed into the A.A. course. The distribution of course placements based on the CEPT score was placed in figure 2.

A comparison of CEPT based placement and course success was made. A search was conducted through the transcripts of thirty-six percent of the 2714 students who had taken the CEPT between July 5, 1988 and January 31, 1989. These students were selected

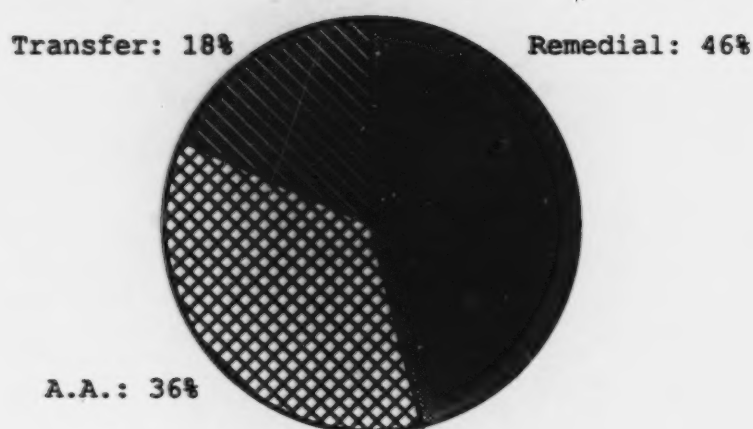


Figure 2
Distribution of Composition Course
Placements Based on the
CEPT Score Received
(N = 2714)

arbitrarily in an attempt to gather results from students with a wide range of CEPT scores. Students who received a grade of A, B, C, or Cr (Credit) were classified as successful and all others were classified as unsuccessful (i.e. those students who withdrew or received a grade of D, F, or NCr (No Credit)). It was found that fifty-two percent (505 individuals) had taken one of the English composition courses in either the Fall, 1988 term or Spring, 1989 term. The success rate (i.e. percent of those who enrolled who were ultimately successful) of those students who took the course into which they were placed based on the CEPT score was calculated as well as the success rates for those who enrolled in other levels. These results were placed in Table 1. The data on which these calculations were based was attached as an Appendix.

Table 1
Comparison of CEPT Based Placement and
Course Success
(N=505)

CEPT Course Placement	Course Actually Taken		
	Remedial % Successful	A.A. % Successful	Transfer % Successful
Remedial	76% (N=136)	83% (N=23)	95% (N=20)
A.A.	63% (N=8)	78% (N=165)	94% (N=31)
Transfer	100% (N=1)	100% (N=1)	75% (N=120)

Those students who enrolled in a course more advanced than that suggested by their CEPT score succeeded at a higher rate than the group that took the recommended course. This may have been due to the fact that a student would normally have needed to take a writing sample to qualify for placement into the more advanced class. Since ninety-four percent of the students who took the writing sample and then enrolled in English composition were successful (see Table 4), it was not surprising that these students exhibited the high success rate displayed Table 1. These students may, perhaps, be characterized as uncommonly motivated.

Assessment Based on the Writing Sample

A total of 244 individuals took the writing sample during the investigation period. The distribution of the course placements that resulted from the performance of these students on the writing sample was shown in figure 3. While slightly more than

half of those who took the writing sample received placements into the A.A. level course, more than one-third were placed into the transfer course.

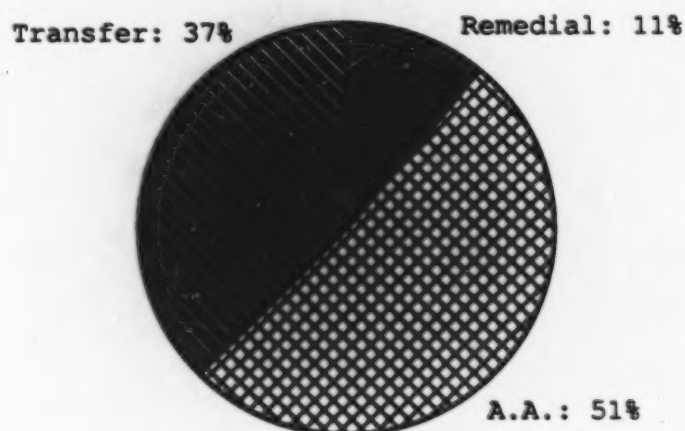


Figure 3

Distribution of Course Placements
Based on the Writing Sample
(N=244)

The rate of placement in the transfer course from the writing sample was twice that from the CEPT test. The placement rate in the remedial level course, based on the writing sample, was approximately one-quarter that observed for the CEPT. A direct comparison of the course placement rates for these two tests was constructed in graphical form and placed in figure 4.

The significant difference in placement rates may well have been due to the difference in the populations. All students were expected to take the CEPT while only those not satisfied with their placement needed to take the writing sample. It was likely that the large number of students who placed into the remedial

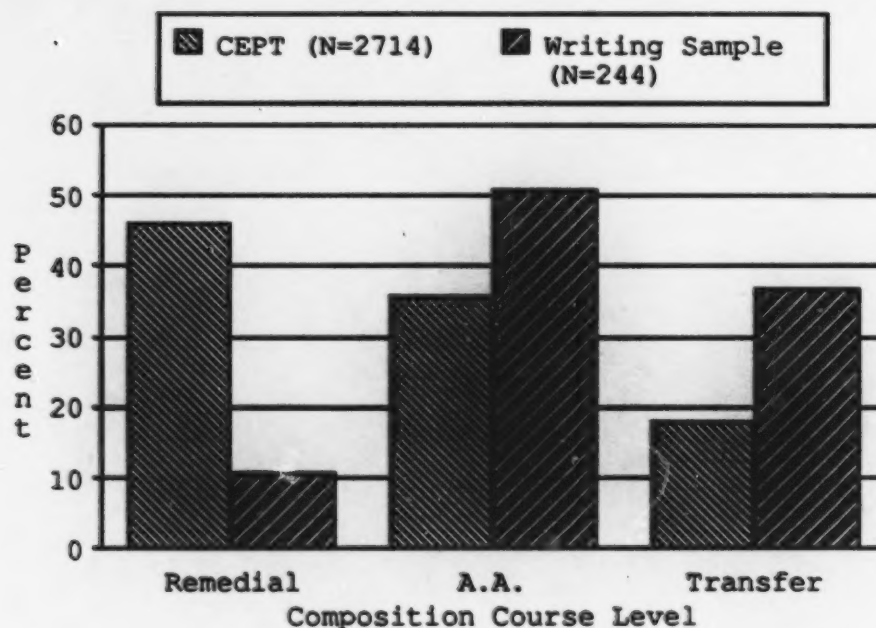


Figure 4

Rate of Course Placements as a Function of the Assessment Instrument

course based on the CEPT were comfortable with that result. The students who took the writing sample obviously believed their CEPT placement was too low and may have demonstrated that fact on the writing sample.

It was possible to determine the CEPT score for fifty-six percent of the students who completed the writing sample. For those 137 students, the distribution of course placements resulting from the writing sample was essentially the same as that shown in figure 3 for the entire population of 244. Specifically, for these 137 students, fourteen percent were placed in the remedial course, forty-eight percent were placed in the A.A. course, and thirty-eight percent received the recommendation to enroll in the transfer level class.

A comparison was made between the English composition course placement recommendations that resulted from the two different instruments for this group of 137 students. The two placements were in agreement for thirty-five percent of those choosing to take the writing sample. Those who received a higher placement due to the writing sample were sixty percent of those who chose to complete that exercise. Five percent received a lower placement. These results were summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Comparison of Placement Recommendations of Those
Students Who Completed Both the CEPT and
the Writing Sample
(N=137)

Writing Sample Placement	CEPT Placement		
	Remedial	A.A.	Transfer
Remedial	9%	5%	none
A.A.	23%	25%	none
Transfer	16%	21%	1%

Ignoring the two students who completed the writing sample after they already had received English 1A placement through the CEPT, the independence of the course placements based on these two instruments was tested using a standard contingency table technique. The observed frequencies in each category were shown in Table 3 along with the predicted frequencies, in parentheses, based on the assumption of independence.

Table 3

Contingency Table for Comparison of Placement
Recommendations of those Students Who
Completed Both the CEPT and
the Writing Sample
(N=135)

Writing Sample Placement	CEPT Placement	
	Remedial	A.A.
Remedial	12 (9.15)	7 (9.85)
A.A.	31 (31.3)	34 (33.7)
Transfer	22 (24.6)	29 (26.4)

The differences between the observed and expected frequencies were determined to not be of statistical significance and thus most likely due to chance. There was sufficient evidence to support the claim that the placement recommendations provided by the writing sample and CEPT were independent. In other words, the likelihood of a student who received a CEPT placement into the remedial course being placed in the transfer level course after the writing sample was completed was the same as that for a student who had originally been placed in the A.A. level course. Similarly, the likelihood of a student who received a CEPT placement into the A.A. course being placed in the remedial level course after the writing sample was completed was the same as that for a student who had originally been placed in the remedial level course. Because of this independence any student not satisfied

with their course placement, no matter the level, should be encouraged to complete the writing sample.

Comparison of Writing Sample Placement
and Course Success

To determine the relationship between the writing sample placement into the English composition curriculum and course success, a search was conducted through the transcripts of all students who had taken the writing sample between July 5, 1988 and January 31, 1989 and for whom a CEPT score was known. Students who received a grade of A, B, C, or Cr were classified as successful and all others were classified as unsuccessful (i.e. those students who withdrew or received a grade of D, F, or NCr). The success rates for the one hundred students who actually enrolled in a composition course was displayed in Table 4.

Table 4
Comparison of Writing Sample Placement
and Course Success
(N=100)

Writing Sample Placement	Course Actually Taken		
	Remedial % Successful	A.A. % Successful	Transfer % Successful
Remedial	100% (N=7)	100% (N=4)	100% (N=3)
A.A.	100% (N=5)	87% (N=38)	100% (N=3)
Transfer	None	100% (N=1)	97% (N=39)

Ninety-four percent of the students who took the writing sample and then enrolled in English composition were successful. This completion rate was significantly higher than the sixty-nine percent rate for all students in these composition courses. Students who requested and then completed the writing sample may, perhaps, be characterized as uncommonly motivated.

Comparison of the Success of Students Who Were Admitted
After Completing the Prerequisite Course and
Those Admitted Through Other Means

A standard statistical test for independence was conducted to determine if student success was independent of the path used to enroll in an English composition course. The student may have entered the course after completing the prerequisite course at Saddleback College or through use of a test score, course at another institution, or by some other means. To provide the necessary data for this test a random sample of two hundred students was selected. Using a random number table and the complete set of grade sheets for the composition courses for the Fall, 1988 and Spring, 1989 terms one hundred students at the A.A. level and one hundred students at the transfer level were selected. The transcripts for these students were examined to determine if they had completed a prerequisite English composition course at Saddleback College prior to enrolling in the course from which they were selected. Further, students who received a grade of A, B, C, or Cr in the class from which they were chosen were classified as successful and all others were classified as

unsuccessful (i.e. those students who withdrew or received a grade of D, F, or NCr).

Of the sample of two hundred students, forty-three percent had completed a prerequisite course at Saddleback College. Of this sample of two hundred students, seventy-two percent were successful. Since the success rate for all students at the A.A. level was sixty-eight percent and the success rate for all students at the transfer level was seventy-two percent, the success rate observed in this sample was essentially the same as the population from which it was drawn. The sample was thus found to be representative of the population of composition students at the upper two levels.

The students in the sample were divided into categories depending on their method of entry into the class and their success in that class. The independence of course success and these two methods of course entry were tested using a standard contingency table technique. The observed frequencies for each category were shown in Table 5 along with the predicted frequencies, in parentheses, based on the assumption of independence. The differences between the observed and expected frequencies were determined to not be of statistical significance and thus most likely due to chance.

There was sufficient evidence to support the claim that student success was independent of the route used by the student to gain entry into the composition class. The likelihood of success of a student who entered a particular composition course, after she or he received that placement level from the assessment

process, was the same as that for a student who enrolled after having completed the prerequisite course. The assessment process appropriately matched the preparation given to continuing students through prerequisite courses.

Table 5
Contingency Table
Course Success vs. Method of Entry

Method of Entry	Course Success	
	Number of Successful Students	Number of Unsuccessful Students
Prerequisite Course	60 (62)	26 (24)
Placement Test or Other Means	84 (82)	30 (32)

Discussion

It was difficult, from a research standpoint, to address the validity of a required placement device already in place. The very presence of required placement effected the nature of the data available for collection. For example, if the goal of the placement process was to select students for entry into various classes based on certain percentile levels, theoretically figure 1 could have been used to determine the appropriate cut off scores. But, because students were required to obtain certain scores for course placement at the time the CEPT was taken, modifications were made to the data to address the needs of those individuals

close to the existing minimum scores. Students were reassigned scores of seventy or fifty-five to allow entry into a more advanced class for which, it was felt, they would most probably be successful. However, information about the actual scores for these students was lost and the determination of the actual percentiles disturbed.

If, on the other hand, the purpose of the assessment process was to place students into the most advanced course for which they would probably be successful, from a research standpoint (though, perhaps, not a humanistic one) it would be desirable to allow students, if they so desired, to enter classes for which the faculty felt they were not prepared and actually observe that they were unsuccessful. Although this study has documented the success of students in courses more advanced than those recommended by the CEPT or by the writing sample, the fact remains that to gain entry into these more advanced classes the students generally had to be placed there based on the recommendation of one of the two instruments. Insufficient data exists on the success or lack of success of students who entered a class for which neither instrument suggested success.

It was clear from the success of students placed through the assessment process that the existent cut off scores were not too low. That they were not too high (in the context of the assumed goal of the second example) was not equally clear. To permit research in this area it would be necessary to allow the entry scores to decrease until some statistically significant disaster became apparent. This could be done by lowering the cut off

scores slightly each semester while student performance was monitored. This process would continue until a significant decrease in student success was observed. At that point, it would be known that the immediately preceding scores were the minimum consistent with the assessment policy of the matriculation program.

Conclusion

While it is not possible, under the current assessment model, to quantitatively show that the cut off scores are not too high, there is reason to believe that this is the case. These minimum performance levels on the CEPT were set after careful consideration by the English composition faculty. A similar process was used by the mathematics faculty to determine the cut off scores for the mathematics assessment tests. A self-placement model in that discipline allowed for a statistical study of the validity of those values and they were found to be reasonable. Because on their experience with the results of student placement based on these scores, the English composition faculty feel the current minimum levels are appropriate. Further, the students do not appear to be dissatisfied. For those students who feel that their composition skills have not been accurately assessed, a well defined appeal process is in place. Consequently, no recommendations for change in the cut off scores of the objective portion of the English composition assessment process resulted from this investigation.

APPENDIX

CEPT SCORES AND COURSE SUCCESS

In the table below is shown the English composition course success for 505 arbitrarily selected students for whom the CEPT score was known. The major column headings indicate the course level in which the student enrolled: remedial, A.A., transfer. The column subheadings indicate whether or not the student was successful in that course. Students who received a grade of A, B, C, or Cr were classified as successful (column heading: S) and all others were classified as not successful (column heading: NS).

CEPT	Remedial		Associates		Transfer		Row
SCORE	NS	S	NS	S	NS	S	Total
0							0
1							0
2							0
3							0
4							0
5	1						1
6							0
7							0
8							0
9							0
10		2					2
11							0
12							0
13						1	1
14							0
15				1			1
16							0
17				1			1
18						1	1
19				1			1
20							0
21							0
22							0
23		2					2
24	1	2					3
25							0
26	1	2					3
27		1			1		2
28	1	4				1	6
29	2	2					4
30	1			1			2
31		1					1
32	3	4					7
33	1	4					5
34	1	1					2

CEPT	Remedial		Associates		Transfer		Row
SCORE	NS	S	NS	S	NS	S	Total
35		3					3
36		1				1	2
37	2	3					5
38	1	2					3
39	1	2					3
40		2				1	3
41		2				1	3
42		3		1			4
43		3		1			4
44	2	6				1	9
45	1	1		1		1	4
46		2					2
47		1		1			2
48		4				1	5
49		4				1	5
50	2	7	1	2		1	13
51	2	5	3	2		2	14
52	3	12		2		2	19
53	3	9		2		3	17
54	4	6		3		1	14
55		1	3	23	2		29
56		2	6	15		2	25
57	3	1	8	11		1	24
58		1	3	13		1	18
59			1	4		3	8
60			2	6		1	9
61				6		2	8
62				6		1	7
63			2	2		3	7
64				2		3	5
65			3	5		3	11
66			3	9		1	13
67			2	11		2	15
68			2	9		2	13
69			2	6		4	12

CEPT	Remedial		Associates		Transfer		Row
SCORE	NS	S	NS	S	NS	S	Total
70		1		1	8	21	31
71					6	19	25
72					2	10	12
73					4	5	9
74					1	3	4
75						7	7
76						5	5
77							0
78					2	2	4
79					1		1
80					1	3	4
81					1		1
82							0
83						1	1
84						2	2
85					1		1
86						3	3
87							0
88						1	1
89					1	2	3
90					2		2
91						1	1
92							0
93							0
94						1	1
95						1	1
96						1	1
97						1	1
98						1	1
99							0
100							0
Total	36	109	41	148	33	138	505

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